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Anxious girls and laid-back boys: Teachers' and study counsellors' gendered perceptions of students

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Efforts to reach gender equality in education in Finland have been extensive. Both teacher education and policy documents for schools have focused on gender equality and gender-neutral treatment of students. The aim of this study is to explore if and how these efforts are manifested in upper secondary school teachers' and study counsellors' perceptions of students' self-belief, academic emotions, study habits and behaviour at school. Twenty-three interviews were conducted and analysed qualitatively through inductive content analysis. The results revealed that teachers and study counsellors perceive that girls' low self-belief and high achievement expectations affected their academic performance, while boys' insecurity or need for support was rarely mentioned. The teachers ascribed the students several gender stereotypical attributes: Girls' were perceived as diligent and hard-working while boys were perceived as being indifferent towards school and achievements. The implications of these results for students' self-belief and for teacher education are discussed.

Keywords: gender, stereotypes, self-belief, academic emotions, study habits

Introduction

Gender equality and gender awareness have been a topic in educational research for decades. An extensive number of research reports and recommendations for teacher education have been produced in Finland only (Lahelma, 2011). Some of them focused on narrowing the gender gap in educational outcomes and others on teachers' gender awareness and sensitivity for promoting equality between boys and girls. Teachers' role in promoting gender equality in Finland at a national level had already been stated three decades ago (Act on Equality between Women and Men 1986/609). However,

the effects were modest, to say the least (Lahelma, 2011). Moreover, the governmental action plans have been criticized for focusing on measurable underachievement and dropout rates among boys, rather than on gender equality per se (Brunila & Edström, 2013). Nevertheless, the gender gap in educational outcomes is growing all over the industrialized world and gender segregation in science, technology and mathematics (STEM) fields is evident (Stoet & Geary, 2018; Voyer & Voyer, 2014). Paradoxically, the segregation in STEM fields seems to grow in nations with higher gender equality. Finland and Norway scored highest on gender equality in a study by Stoet and Geary (2018), yet, women graduating with a STEM degree is among the lowest internationally. The study also revealed that gender differences in science self-efficacy, i.e. beliefs in one's ability to accomplish a certain task (Bandura, 1995), were substantially in favour of Finnish male students. These results do not fit well with the perception of advances in gender equality endeavours in education in Finland.

Finland is often perceived as a country with high equality, where gender issues are solved (Lahelma, 2011). However, there seems to be a rigid socially and culturally embedded force that sustains gender segregations and impedes true gender equality in education. The aim of this study, therefore, is to explore how upper secondary school teachers and study counsellors perceive students' self-belief, study habits, academic emotions and behaviour at school and how their perceptions and expectations can reflect and reproduce stereotyped gender roles. The role of the study counsellor is to support students during upper secondary school by helping them choose courses and schedule their studies, as well as provide information about tertiary education and thereby helping them choose what subject to focus on in the national matriculation exam. Study counsellors meet students both individually and in class. Academic emotions, on the other hand, are defined as emotions related to studying (Pekrun et al., 2002).

Teachers' perceptions of students have been shown to affect students in many ways, for example they affect effort and achievements (Jones & Myhill, 2004). Their perceptions can reveal pitfalls that need to be remediated in order to narrow the gender gap in education and educational aspirations and thus promote equality in educational settings. It is worth noting that gender equality means more than increased numbers of women following a STEM career. Rather, it means that gender

should not affect how students are treated or students' self-belief and thereby educational aspirations. The theoretical focus in this study is on socially constructed and transmitted gender role expectations.

Gender roles and school – where do they come from and why do they matter

Even in early childhood, parents' stereotyped gender role perceptions are transmitted through expectations that can become self-fulfilling (Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990). The socialization process of gender roles continues at school where teachers' expectations affect students and their performance (Muntoni & Retelsdorf, 2018; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Jones & Myhill, 2004). The effect of teachers' expectations on performance is mediated through students' self-belief (Friedrich et al., 2015). Furthermore, the social roles at school have been suggested to contribute to gender differences in educational outcomes (Spinath, Eckert, & Steinmayr, 2014). Girls' weaker performance in science has been explained by the process of stereotype threat through which group members, in this case girls, act according to expectations (Casad, Hale, & Wachs, 2017). However, stereotype threat seems to affect boys' achievements as well (Hartley & Sutton, 2013). When boys are not expected to perform well at school, they will not perform well. In general, girls are often perceived by teachers as better adapted to the learning environment at school, especially when it comes to self-discipline and agreeableness (Spinath et al., 2014).

The social roles are constructed, reinforced and reconstructed within schools. When the socially-constructed masculine role is interpreted as an indifference towards academic work, it can affect academic achievements (Jackson, 2003; Jackson & Dempster, 2009). However, Legewie and DiPrete (2012) suggest that how the local learning environment is constructed is more decisive for boys' anti-school discourses than the effects of masculinity roles or social background. Furthermore, they argue that girls' peer-groups in different social environments differ less in academic engagement than boys' peer-groups. However, these perceptions of girls as a homogenous group affect most those students who do not fit into the stereotypical category (Odenbring, 2019; Riley, 2014). Likewise, high-achieving girls must still negotiate their position between being a 'proper school girl' and at the same time stand out like an achiever in masculine terms (Skelton, Francis, & Read, 2010). How

students are perceived also affects if and what kind of support is provided for them (Odenbring, 2019). High-achieving girls are easily overlooked, since they portray the image of success, and are therefore rarely the focus of interest in research and public debate. At the same time, many girls feel stressed and inadequate in relation to academic tasks, which affects their overall wellbeing (Salmela-Aro, 2017). However, boys in academic upper secondary schools also show an increasing risk of burnout during the school years (Salmela-Aro & Tynkkynen, 2012), which raises concerns about both girls' and boys' wellbeing in educational settings.

In summary, gender roles are important for students' educational achievements, aspirations and wellbeing. Moreover, teachers and study counsellors have a vital role when stereotyped gender roles are perpetuated through their perceptions and expectations. The effects of these stereotypes should be recognized and eliminated to support all students' studying and transition to further education.

Method

Participants and data collection

This was an interview study consisting of 23 semi-structured interviews with study counsellors (6), and teachers in psychology (8) and science (9) at nine academically oriented upper secondary schools in Finland in which the language of tuition was Swedish (18 women, 5 men). Officially, Finland is a bilingual country in which teaching is provided in either Finnish or Swedish, both of which are formal national languages. In line with the Finnish constitution, the language of instruction is either Swedish or Finnish. Roughly six percent of the students attend Swedish schools (Official Statistics of Finland, 2017). The national curriculum is shared, but the administration is separate. The matriculation examination in the end of upper secondary school is the only national exam in Finland and the results affect students' future opportunities in admission to tertiary education.

Henceforth 'counsellor' will be used as a shortened form of 'study counsellors'. The number of students varied between approximately 120 to 330 in the schools, indicating that the schools are relatively small and therefore making it possible for

teachers and counsellors to know their students fairly well. The schools represent a geographic distribution as well as a variation in socioeconomic status. Psychology and science were chosen due to lower grades in the national exam among Swedish speaking students in these subjects compared with their Finnish speaking peers. These differences have been explained by, for example, educational policies that affect the allocation of resources to minority schools (less learning material in Swedish etc.), by minority schools representing larger heterogeneity in academic achievement than majority schools, and by the widespread shortage of accredited teachers in the Swedish schools (Brink, Nissinen, & Vettenranta, 2013). However, the differences in achievements between the language groups are decreasing (Brink & Nissinen, 2018). The interviewees represented different gender and length of working experience (from two to thirty-five years). The interviews included the following themes: the teachers' and counsellors' perceptions of students' learning activities, study challenges, self-efficacy and self-regulated learning, career aspirations, schools' supportive arrangements and preparation for higher education.

The interviewees were invited to participate by email. The interviews were conducted in a location preferred by the interviewees, which in most cases was at the school, except one via Skype and one at the teacher's home. The interviews were conducted between May 2016 and January 2017. They were based on informed consent and the interviewees were promised confidentiality. Gender neutral pseudonyms were used for the interviewees, since revealing their gender could jeopardize their confidentiality. Moreover, the interviewees' gender did not affect how they described their students. This was indicated by the fact that the same kind of gendered perceptions of students were expressed by both female and male teachers and both groups' gender stereotypes were similar with regard to their students. For example, young female teachers' stereotyped perceptions were similar to those of older males. The interviews lasted for 45 to 100 minutes and were all audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis

The data were analysed using qualitative inductive content analysis without a

prepared coding framework (Fingeld-Connett, 2014). The initial analysis of every segment in the transcribed interviews resulted in 103 codes. One segment was defined here as the interviewees' spoken words between the interviewer's questions. Thereafter the codes were narrowed down to 56 by combining overlapping ones. Similarities in the interviewees' perceptions were highlighted and key features were identified. The codes were consequently grouped into seven main categories whereof three themes were extracted and analysed for the present study because gender emerged as a distinct feature in all of them: (1) self-belief, academic emotions and wellbeing, (2) studying and learning and (3) behaviour in class. 'Self-belief, emotions and wellbeing' included descriptions of students' emotional responses to studying, insecurity, achievement demands, and overall wellbeing. *'They are very ambitious and have high achievement expectations both in their leisure activities and in school and it might create such a feeling of stress'* is an example of a segment in this first category. 'Studying and learning' related to study skills, self-regulation and learning activities. For example, the segment *'Maybe they blame someone else more. They don't take responsibility for their learning.'* was categorized as 'studying and learning'. When teachers talked about students' overt behaviour like help seeking or classroom behaviour it was categorized as 'behaviour', for example *'It is automatically a sign of weak prerequisites if you go and sit in the back in class and especially girls tend to place a big handbag in front of their "office" and sit there thinking that they learn by being physically present'*.

Teachers' and counsellors' gendered perceptions of students

The teachers and counsellors attributed several gender stereotypes to their students. Overall, girls were perceived as being more responsible and willing to make an effort although all school work was not 'tremendously motivating all the time', as one teacher put it. Boys were described as being more externally regulated than girls in that they avoided responsibility for their school work and relying on teachers and counsellors to look after them. The teachers and counsellors explained that the boys needed a 'mother' who reminded them about courses and deadlines. However, also some concerns about how this could be disadvantageous for the boys' self-regulation

in the long run were raised.

Counsellor Flink: Boys don't stress or plan their time at all that 'oh no, was it today?' [laughter] 'will you still be here during the next recess?'. Girls are more like if they have a deadline, they will take care of it and such, but boys don't have the same habit. You have to run after them and say 'hey, hello!'. I've tried not to do it very often because I know it's not always good because they have to start taking responsibility, especially when they begin in tertiary education.

Gender differences were also described in the interviews in relation to learning activities. Boys were pictured as being more creative and less afraid to deal with new tasks, whereas girls were viewed as being more conscientious with homework and exam preparation. Teachers and counsellors also described girls as being afraid to think outside the box or to be creative, since more loosely articulated tasks entail more uncertainty. However, previous research (Gralewski & Karwowski, 2013) has shown that teachers' ratings of students, and especially girls', creativity is not very accurate.

Teacher Thomasson: Girls like perhaps more ... well, less-creative tasks. It might be a little nasty to say, but many girls like to read a text and pick out what's most important. It feels safe that way, they cannot fail very much with such a task. If it is a more freely formulated task that actually requires more creativity and if there is a bigger chance to fail and to misunderstand the task, then somehow the girls might not dare to try such tasks while the boys might prefer such [tasks].

Moreover, boys' tendency to open up discussions easily on different issues was perceived as promoting their learning since it supports a deeper understanding by constructing knowledge on a broader level. Boys, for example, were expected to debate different issues, usually about technology. Thereby, they were expected to extend their understanding of different concepts beyond course content. The teachers and counsellors also tended to attribute boys' success to an ability to think logically, while girls' achievements were attributed to hard work. The interpretation among teachers that girls work harder than boys at school has also been shown in previous research (Heyder & Kessels, 2015) and is strengthening the perception of male dominance in innate ability. When girls' performance did not meet the level that could be expected as a result of their hard work, it was called underachievement. Boys, on

the other hand, who achieved well (especially in the matriculation examination) were called overachievers, in the sense that they were not expected to achieve well due to their seemingly laid-back attitude towards school work.

Teacher Thomasson: Well, I don't know if it's a cliché, but I think girls often try, they can sit at home and do their homework for two hours and maybe not get anywhere [with it], while the boys ...don't even bother to try. It ... is also like if you try to hide what you don't know behind a kind of indifference, maybe boys use more that style. I don't know. Girls, I think, usually there are many who work [hard] but nothing will come out of it.

Interviewer: Do you see it in the [achievement] results as well?

Teacher Thomasson: Well, unfortunately the boys [laughter] sometimes there are those that I know studied even for the matriculation exam only the last week or they have worked hard during the last preparatory course [for the matriculation examination] and then they perform with top grades although they haven't done anything during these three years in upper secondary. Then we have girls who have worked several hours a week during the whole time and done their absolute best and then they might be a little stressed and such and then they perform worse than these lazy boys.

The label 'lazy' was used by the teachers and counsellors when they described boys' schoolwork outside class, indicating a generalized assumption about boys' learning activities. In the same manner, girls were perceived to work hard and also to struggle with homework implying that assignments are difficult for girls. The teachers and counsellors were aware of the girls' tendency to be stressed before the matriculation examination, but they implied that when push comes to shove boys make it with the help of their intellectual capacity. Although the teachers and counsellors acknowledged that it was not entirely fair that the girls' hard work did not pay off, they felt helpless in how to rectify it. They explained that they were aware of that the girls made an effort; however, they could not reward the hard work since the grades speak for themselves. Some of the interviewees suggested that nervousness blocked the girls from performing at their level, but also other underlying assumptions were expressed. As the teachers below interpret it, the difference in girls' and boys' achievements can

be explained by differences in ability.

Interviewer: Why do you think that girls 'underachieve', and boys 'overachieve'?

Teacher Borg: I think it has something to do with the attitude and those nerves or what we should call them, because when you get nervous and maybe also that these diligent, in quotation marks, don't have the absolutely best ability to think logically and finally their mathematic problem solving is not the best, but they have succeeded in course exams because they've known that when it's about this course, you do this. But when it is mixed [as in the matriculation examination] it becomes difficult and that's why they get worse grades in the matriculation exam compared to regular exams, while these boys then [laughter], if we generalize again, have been a little lazy during the three years and they haven't succeeded in the regular exams, but they could manage if they only worked harder, because they have the logical thinking.

There seemed to be an underlying assumption among teachers and counsellors that boys are smarter than girls, but that the school system that requires diligence and self-discipline do not suit boys' learning strategies. On the contrary, since girls were perceived to have these qualities they were also expected to achieve well. When girls fail to meet these achievement expectations their achievements might be interpreted as underachievement. Moreover, the teachers and counsellors mentioned girls' difficulties in comprehending overall pictures of subjects or to transfer theory into practice. They also brought up the assumption that diligent students (i.e., girls) compensate their lack of ability by working hard but when the demands increase, girls' hard work is not enough. For example, teachers and counsellors reported that girls more often than boys drop out of advanced mathematics, due to e.g. fear of failure, when the demands increase. However, the assumption that girls do not make it with increasing demands, is contradicted by the fact that female students are overrepresented in higher education in Finland (Kalenius, 2014).

Self-belief, academic emotions and wellbeing

Teachers and counsellors described how girls wear themselves out when their efforts are not rewarded in the long run. At the same time boys were allowed to take it easy, because in the end they were believed to be able to prove their academic abilities

despite their laid-back attitude towards school work and achievements. Nevertheless, teachers also mentioned exceptions, but these were few. As mentioned before, teachers and counsellors perceived that girls express more uncertainty regarding assignments and exams than boys. They described girls as anxious and afraid of failure, while they did not see this in boys to the same extent. Previous research indicates that fear of failure affects both genders, although it is less frequently expressed by boys, and that female students lack self-belief particularly in science (Huang, 2013; Jackson, 2010). This is illustrated in the excerpt below.

Teacher Gillberg: You see most differences in self-belief. Boys just try to solve any task and if they fail, they ask each other or they ask me, but girls are quite afraid to fail, and they don't dare to ask as easily. It depends of course on the person as well. But, yes, I would say there is a difference.

Girls uncertainty and low self-belief were described as a hesitation to even begin with assignments without checking every detail beforehand. Yet, this kind of careful preparation for assignments can, in fact, be advantageous for learning, but the teachers and counsellors seemed to interpret it as insecurity rather than conscientiousness. The teachers and counsellors explained that they need to support the girls more than boys and to encourage them the girls to try. The teacher below describes how fear of failure among girls make them freeze when they are unsure of how to solve a task.

Teacher Wahlberg: Girls are clearly more insecure. If I change a number two to a number three in the tests, they can solve it as good as anyone. If I rephrase the task a little differently - 'what should I do now?' - because now it isn't exactly like the one we practised and practised and practised, but a little bit different. Now you need to dare to try [laughter]. Read, think about what have I written and you'll see that it is exactly what we've practised although not an identical task.

Interviewer: So, you think it is more that they don't dare to try rather than that they lack enough knowledge?

Teacher Wahlberg: It is that they don't dare, they become paralyzed with terror when they see that 'oh [makes frightened sound] there are some weird characters and now there is something strange we haven't learned before, and I cannot do this'.

When students feel insecure and are afraid of making mistakes, it affects their learning activities and classroom behaviour (Boekaerts & Niemivirta, 2000). According to the teachers and counsellors in this study, this was more noticeable among girls. However, several teachers and counsellors acknowledged the fact that boys can be insecure as well, but that they are better at hiding it behind other behavioural patterns. If girls fail in a task, they try to hide their mistake, while boys are more comfortable in telling the whole class that they failed, the teachers described. Boys explain their failure by lack of time or some other self-worth protecting arguments, which would justify their failure, according to the teachers. Hiding failure could be related to the impostor syndrome, namely the feeling of being an intellectual fraud. Although impostorism is common among both female and male students, previous research has indicated that it affects female students' academic achievements more (Cokley et al., 2015). The feeling of being an impostor can make female students over work to compensate for the lack of self-belief. In this study impostorism was ascribed only to girls and especially in science.

Teacher Lind: There is this thing that 'although I've got high grades in all my exams so far, I still don't understand anything. I must have been lucky when I got everything right before'. And the boys can be like they can sit there with their sixes or sevens [scale 4–10] and think that 'oh, I'm good, I know this [laughter] and then in the matriculation examination I will know it and I will succeed' and the girls sit with their nines and then 'in the matriculation examination I will fail, I won't know anything'.

Working very hard can lead to negative academic emotions, especially when the workload increases and students feel a lack of control (Pekrun et al., 2007). Teachers in this study described how girls openly expressed feelings of stress and anxiety, while boys kept quiet. Girls were also perceived to need a higher sense of control, for example by carefully preparing for exams and wanting to be clear about what the exam required, while boys relied on their confidence and did not worry in advance. The stress among students was supposedly seen in their overall wellbeing, for example

as absence from school, emotional outbursts or physical symptoms like stomach pain or insomnia.

Another often-mentioned difference between genders was the high achievement expectations among girls. The expectation to 'be diligent', according to the teachers and counsellors, was thought to stem from the socially constructed role for the girls in society. The teachers and counsellors perceived girls as being more aware of the demands of admission to higher education, which could result in a heavy workload for them. At the same time, boys were perceived as being able to prioritize more easily and skipping anything unnecessary. Moreover, the girls' high ambitions were perceived to affect their wellbeing, as the counsellor below describes.

Interviewer: Why do you think they feel bad?

Counsellor Flink: Well, we have this group of very diligent girls who put enormous pressure on themselves to perform very well. It is a large group and it affects them so they totally freeze and then they cannot study at all or it leads to eating disorders or sleeping problems or something like that.

Girls were also described as having high achievement demands in several other aspects of life like sports. According to the teachers, boys can compensate for a lack of good school grades by being good at sports or other extracurricular activities, while girls feel a need to perform well in all areas. Girls were also perceived to be more open about their achievement expectations. Moreover, their achievement expectations were perceived to be related to self-handicapping activities like postponing exams. For example, they could report sick on exam day to buy some more time to prepare. This was interpreted as insecurity and fear of failure among girls. Boys, on the other hand, were not perceived as being particularly bothered by getting low grades. The difference in achievement expectations between boys and girls was explained by the teacher in the following excerpt.

Teacher Wahlberg: Maybe that's why they might invest more in regular exams because they demand so much of themselves and therefore practice more. For boys, who take it easier, it might not be as important to get a ten [scale 1–10] in the course

or a nine, they are satisfied with a little less, but when they need to, they make an equal effort.

Interviewer: Why do you think some of them have this performance anxiety and others think again that 'well, it goes as it goes'? Where do these demands come from?

Teacher Wahlberg: I don't know, I think it is so challenging like the whole world nowadays when you can see so much, and you see only all these perfect people and I think the girls are on these social media [platforms] more often. The boys might play more games [laughter] and don't go on like the girls and see all these perfect women everywhere in the pictures. It's a little bit sad.

Boys were perceived as relying on that things will work out without extra effort, while girls were seen as having a need to understand what they are doing and why, take notes and organize their studying. Moreover, teachers perceived a notable difference in the maturity among students. Girls were perceived as being more mature and responsible, while boys caught up later on in upper secondary school. This was acknowledged by the teachers, but it did not bother them extensively. Rather, they talked about it as a matter of fact and seemed confident that in the end, the boys would make an effort. Moreover, it seems that the teachers referred to self-regulated learning and responsibility when they talked about students' maturity. At the same time, they seemed to trust that girls' can manage on their own while boys were perceived as being more helpless and lacking self-regulation skills.

Although boys were perceived as being immature and in need of support, they were seldom perceived to express this openly. The feigned lack of interest in school and the emotional distance to achievements were seen as typical behaviour for boys and were tolerated as such. Grades were perceived as being more important for girls. However, high achievement expectations did not always mean high achievement. According to the teachers, girls' negative academic emotions could cause them 'underachieve', in the sense that they do not perform as expected, in important exams, like the final matriculation examination. This worried several teachers, since the girls often work hard throughout upper secondary school, but when they have to

prove their knowledge in the national matriculation examination, the teachers perceived that their nerves fail them, and they panic and get stuck.

Interviewer: Do you see a difference in how they achieve in the matriculation exam?

Teacher Johansson: Yes, when these boys with high grades need to, they do very well, while a girl with the same grade who has worked hard for that grade somehow underachieves. It feels like an underachievement. And I think it's sad also because it's not nice to see that they've worked very, very hard, but maybe that's what's holding them back, that they don't manage the coherent whole [in the matriculation examination].

To summarize, although many of the teachers and counsellors were initially reluctant to discuss group differences, several underlying assumptions about gender-typical behaviour were mentioned by them. They expressed frustration and a lack of means of how to support the girls to believe in themselves. Overall, the teachers and counsellors were aware of the need to support the insecure students, mostly girls, but very few of them mentioned how to support boys' learning and motivate them to study. Yet they were disappointed on the behalf of the girls that their hard work did not get the credit it deserved, however, the teachers felt helpless in trying to support the girls reduce their demands on themselves and strengthen their self-belief. Moreover, they did not problematize boys' laid-back behaviour, or the fact that boys rarely spoke about their emotions or self-doubts. The fact that the teachers and counsellors seemed to be unaware of their role in perpetuating rigid gender roles through the process of self-fulfilling prophecies is problematic in many ways, as will be discussed next.

Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore how upper secondary school teachers and counsellors perceive students' self-belief, academic emotions, studying and behaviour. This study adds to the understanding about how teachers and counsellors think that girls' and boys' self-belief and achievements affect the gender gap in education. The main findings show that teachers and counsellors still hold quite stereotypical gender beliefs about students in upper secondary school, although Finland is one of the most equal countries in the world (UNESCO, 2018). Despite the teachers' and counsellors'

awareness of the problems with categorising students and generalising group characteristics, their gendered expectations of students still permeated the interviews. This demonstrates the importance of continuously raising awareness, in schools and in teacher education, of gender stereotypes and how they affect students' academic achievements and self-belief (Jones & Myhill, 2004). How teachers attribute behaviours to students may have long-lasting effects on students' studying and aspirations in educational settings.

One of the more distinct results of this study was that teachers and counsellors perceived girls to be insecure and lacking in self-belief in their own studying. Girls' low self-belief, especially in science, combined with high achievement expectations were perceived to affect their learning strategies and study habits. Interestingly, girls' conscientiousness with regard to their studies was interpreted as uncertainty, which might not be an accurate interpretation. For example, a meta-analytic study by Stajkovic et al. (2018) showed a positive correlation between conscientiousness and self-efficacy. Moreover, girls were seen as being afraid of asking questions in class if they were unsure about a task. This could reflect a fear that by doing so, they give the perception that they lack enough knowledge. According to the teachers, insecurity among girls leads to tension and anxiety during the final exams (the matriculation examination), which interfere with their performance. The teachers and counsellors claimed that girls' high achievement expectations together with low self-belief, make them work too hard and stress disproportionately much. Together with the high stakes of the national matriculation examination, it can result in increased anxiety, stress and fear of failure. Nevertheless, what worried the teachers and counsellors most was the negative consequences for girls' wellbeing. Students' wellbeing has been shown to promote a deeper level of learning which is vital in tertiary education (Trigwell, Ellis, & Han, 2012).

Boys, on the other hand, were perceived as being smart but a little lazy and immature. Not once did any of the teachers or counsellors refer to a lack of ability among boys as they did for girls. On the other hand, they were also perceived as being rather indifferent about achievement and school in general. By loudly announcing their poor exam results they strengthen the perception that they do not care. They might do it to protect their self-worth (see also Jackson, 2002; Jackson 2010) or because they

simply do not care, which was how the teachers perceived it. Boys were perceived generally as having low ambition and trying to get by effortlessly. Nevertheless, the teachers and counsellors in this study allowed this kind of behaviour because they thought the boys would make it in the end anyway. Yet, the negative effects on achievements, behaviour, gender roles and self-belief of these stereotypes and expectancies have been widely demonstrated (Friedrich et al., 2015; Jones & Myhill, 2004; Jussim & Harber, 2005; Myhill & Jones, 2006). Therefore, it is important to raise awareness of the stereotypes despite all the endeavours to create gender equal schools.

The teachers' and counsellors' perceptions of their students are problematic on several levels. The attributions of success were clearly gender biased, with girls' success attributed to persistence and effort and boys' success attributed to intellectual ability. According to Riley (2014), the negative effects of attributions are also accentuated when they are perceived as uncontrollable or stable. An example from our study is the teachers' and counsellors' perception that girls lack an ability to think logically and that their efforts cannot compensate for it. Moreover, when teachers perceive ability as being fixed, it promotes activities such as procrastination or task-avoiding since the risk of failure increases when ability is uncontrollable (Dweck & Master, 2008).

Fear of failure or of being revealed as a fraud (impostorism) obscure the situation even more. Impostorism is strengthened when it is pointed out that girls work hard to get high grades, while boys can make it effortlessly. When effort is perceived as compensating for a lack of ability it can lead to a belief that what they know is not based on understanding. Moreover, if girls are expected to achieve due to effort, they rarely dare to slow down and take it easier, which again can increase their perceived stress. On the other hand, boys who do not academically succeed effortlessly may feel inadequate and insecure when they do not live up to the expectations of true ability and might thereby also experience impostorism. However, boys' impostorism can be less visible due to rigid gender role expectations. According to Cokley et al. (2015), both female and male students who are aware of gender stigmas, are more likely to feel like intellectual frauds. Additionally, when boys are perceived as succeeding without effort, it can make them feel compelled to hide or

avoid making an effort to preserve the perception that they are not engaged in their schooling.

Teachers and counsellors reinforce the perception of boys' indifferent attitude by quietly accepting it, which in turn can strengthen their (feigned) indifference. It is worth noting that the teachers' and counsellors' perceptions of students' achievements are partly confirmed in statistics in science during the matriculation examination, but in general, girls are over-represented among those who achieve top results (Matriculation Examination Board, 2018). However, girls were also perceived to be less creative, which can affect their learning activities and reinforce their low self-belief even more. Biased perceptions of students affect their gender role socialization, which again affects students' self-efficacy beliefs (Meece & Painter, 2008). Moreover, students with high self-efficacy beliefs tend to attribute success to effort rather than ability (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013). This indicates, together with the recognized correlation between self-efficacy and academic achievement (e.g., Stajkovic et al., 2018), that rigid gender roles affect students on several levels. Additionally, when girls are expected to take responsibility and regulate their learning, girls with low self-regulation skills are left to manage on their own. Simultaneously, while boys are offered external support by teachers and counsellors who keep track of them, their self-regulated learning skills will not be developed. A recent study by Odenbring (2019) shows that how school professionals perceive students affects the support provided for them. This was noticeable also in this study. When teachers and counsellors perceived boys as more immature, they also supported them, for example, by reminding them of deadlines. This, in turn, can be counterproductive for the development of boys' self-regulation skills.

It is important to raise the question and discuss implications on how high achieving boys and effortlessly achieving girls, as well as boys who barely make it through upper secondary school or girls who appear negligent, are treated. Not fitting into predetermined gender roles affects students' wellbeing negatively (Vantieghem, Vermeersch, & Van Houtte, 2014). Moreover, differences in achievement are only partially explained by gender and therefore the focus should be on individual students rather than on the gender group per se (Spinath et al., 2014). It is noteworthy that three of the teachers and counsellors in the present study were more focused on

individual than on group differences and were reluctant to mention gender differences. Nevertheless, the majority still portrayed boys as lazy and girls as diligent, which can strengthen and reproduce gender stereotypes and affect students' future educational aspirations (Latsch & Hannover, 2014).

In conclusion, it was surprising how openly the teachers and counsellors expressed their gendered perceptions of students. The interviews revealed patterns of gender stereotypes that can have a major impact on students, not only in upper secondary schools but also in the transition to tertiary education. Research shows that the transition to further education is a particularly vulnerable phase for students and, furthermore, that there is a discrepancy in the kind of support students need and the support provided at school (Salmela-Aro, 2017). In the choice of further education, teachers' and counsellors' expectations, and thereby provided support, can reinforce vicious circles of effort and attributions of success that can have long-lasting effects on students and their aspirations. In general, although the teachers' and counsellors' seemed to be aware of how society can create and reinforce rigid gender role expectations, their reflection lacked awareness of their own contribution as mediators of these expectations. Therefore, it is important that teachers' and counsellors' stereotyped gender roles are acknowledged and rectified. The results of this study point to pitfalls, such as gender stereotypes and gendered expectations, that continuously need to be emphasized in order to foster equality, fair teaching practices, an open-minded school atmosphere and an overall wellbeing in schools. Moreover, this study suggests that the gender issue is not yet solved and hence needs to be more strongly addressed in teacher education and incorporated into in-service teacher training. Interventions aimed at breaking gender perceptions need to be offered to schools in order for teachers and counsellors to reflect on and change their stereotyped perceptions of and encounters with students, and thereby promote gender equality in schools.

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